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C O N F I D E N T I A L SAN SALVADOR 000712

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TAGS: [ES](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#)
SUBJECT: EL SALVADOR: ELECTIONS A QUALIFIED SUCCESS FOR
ARENA

Classified By: DCM Michael A. Butler, Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: The ruling Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA) party made gains in the March 12 nationwide municipal and Legislative Assembly elections, apparently garnering 34-35 Legislative Assembly seats and 144 (55 percent) of the nation's 262 city halls. The opposition Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) stands poised to have 31 Assembly deputies and 61 mayoralties, including the "grand prize" of San Salvador. Latest results show that ARENA's National Conciliation Party (PCN) allies will take 10 Legislative Assembly seats, the Christian Democratic Party (PDC) six, and the Democratic Change (CD) two. Notwithstanding their clear victory, ARENA's celebration may be tempered by the disappearance of the 14-seat center-left coalition of the Revolutionary Democratic Front (FDR), CD, and PDC with which ARENA had heretofore negotiated legislation requiring a two-thirds (56-vote) supermajority; such legislation will now require cooperation with the FMLN. Turnout appears to have been approximately 1.7 million--some 53 percent of eligible voters, and well above the norm for non-presidential elections. Although the final count for San Salvador is finally in, final counts for all other races should be available by Friday, March 17. END SUMMARY.

ARENA STRONGER IN LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY--BUT SO IS FMLN

¶2. (C) Latest results from the Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE) indicate that ARENA, (which had 29 deputies going into Sunday's elections), will hold 34-35 seats in the new Assembly, while the FMLN (which had 24) will possess 31. (Note: In 2003 elections, ARENA and the FMLN won 27 and 31 seats, respectively; seven FMLN deputies later resigned or were expelled, and formed the FDR. End note.) With the PCN's 10 deputies (down from the 16 it won in 2003--two of whom later defected to ARENA), the center-right 44- to 45-seat ARENA-PCN coalition will continue to wield sufficient votes to pass legislation requiring only a simple majority of 43 votes, but as before, it will not have sufficient strength to pass legislation requiring a two-thirds (56-vote) supermajority. (Note: The assumption of external debt necessary for passage of the annual federal budget, confirmation of officials such as the Attorney General, and constitutional reforms all require a two-thirds vote for approval. End note.)

¶3. (C) For the first time since the March 2005 reapportionment of the nation's 84 Assembly seats according to each department's relative population, 25 Legislative Assembly seats were at stake in San Salvador; the FMLN has apparently carried 12; ARENA 10; and the PCN, PDC, and CD one each. None of the 7 FMLN deputies who had left the party through 2004 and 2005 to form the FDR was reelected; the former 14-seat center-left coalition of which they were a

part will now disappear for all intents and purposes. Even if the 44- to 45-seat ARENA-PCN center-right coalition can obtain the support of the 8 PDC and CD deputies, passage of the federal budget and constitutional reforms will require the votes of at least 3-4 FMLN deputies to achieve the required 56-vote supermajority.

ARENA GAINS IN MAYORAL RACES

14. (C) In municipal elections, ARENA reversed a losing trend that had begun after 1994, and appears to have won 144 city halls, including half of El Salvador's 14 departmental capitals: Ahuachapan, Chalatenango, Cojutepeque, Sensuntepeque, Sonsonate, Usulután, and Zacatecoluca. (Note: In 2003 elections, ARENA and the FMLN won 111 and 74 municipalities, respectively. End note.) The FMLN will apparently now hold 61 city halls, including the departmental capitals of Santa Tecla, San Vicente, and San Salvador (see below). The PCN carried 39 mayoral races (down from 53 in 2003), including an easy triumph by popular San Miguel Mayor Will Salgado--his party's only victory in a departmental capital. The PDC won 14 municipalities--the same number as 2003, including the departmental capitals of La Unión, San Francisco de Gotera, and Santa Ana, as well as the port of La Libertad. La Unión Department, in the nation's conservative eastern region, maintained its distinction of being El Salvador's sole department lacking even a single FMLN-run municipality, and ARENA surprised everyone by snatching away from the FMLN the village of Perquin (Morazan Department), famous for having been the FMLN guerrillas' "capital" during the nation's 1980-1992 armed conflict. Overall, 91 of the nation's 262 municipalities apparently changed governing party on Sunday.

HEATED CONTEST IN SAN SALVADOR

15. (C) San Salvador witnessed the nation's most hotly-contested and controversial race. With early returns showing a dead heat, both ARENA's Rodrigo Samayoa and the FMLN's Violeta Menjívar proclaimed themselves victors Sunday night, incurring the wrath of the TSE. As votes were counted early in the week, the lead changed hands numerous times--usually by no more than approximately 50 votes; the TSE's overworked Internet servers failed, making access to

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reliable and up-to-date information difficult unless one traveled to the TSE's election headquarters at the Hotel Radisson--no easy task given the tight security and throngs of protesters. By Wednesday afternoon, Menjívar led by 59 votes after a hand recount, but 83 ballots were being contested by ARENA. Following TSE President Walter Araujo's 6:30 p.m. announcement that--prior to the declaration of a winner--all 83 disputed ballots would be carefully reexamined in the presence of party representatives, OAS observers, and the media, 200 FMLN militants--some with firearms--approached the Radisson and created disturbances in adjoining neighborhoods. The elite police riot squad (PNC/UMO) calmly held their lines and did not overreact to the provocation, with the result that there were few injuries. The impasse was finally resolved shortly after 2:00 a.m. Thursday (March 16) when, by a margin of 44 votes, the FMLN's Violeta Menjívar was finally declared mayor-elect of the capital city.

16. (C) Incumbent Mayor Carlos Rivas Zamora, who entered office as a moderate FMLN member but leaves it as representative of an FDR/CD/PNL coalition, was characteristically gracious in conceding defeat early on, long before it became clear who won. As with 2003, the FMLN swept virtually all of San Salvador's suburbs, with the notable exception of upscale Antiguo Cuscatlán, where incumbent ARENA Mayor Milagro Navas won a seventh term and sent her FMLN rival Anita Buitrago packing by a two-to-one margin.

17. (C) COMMENT: ARENA's failure to retake the capital no doubt disappoints President Saca, for whom a victory in San Salvador had become a matter of personal prestige. However, given the city's widespread poverty, crime, crumbling and inadequate infrastructure, truculent public-workers union (widely believed to be under direct control of FMLN hardliners), and uncooperative, often-violent street vendors, San Salvador city hall might have proved a mixed blessing at best. ARENA's persistence in reviewing every contested San Salvador ballot past 1:30 a.m. Thursday, even after a Samayoa win was mathematically impossible, detracted from ARENA's impressive gains nationwide. Although the clear victor March 12, ARENA may find little cheer in the legislative scenario that lies ahead. With the 14-seat center-left coalition with which they previously negotiated now gone, they will have no choice but to seek FMLN concurrence in legislative matters requiring a two-thirds majority. For its part, since the FMLN's crushing nationwide defeat in the 2004 presidential race, the party's hardliners have expelled virtually all moderates, abolished open primaries, and rid itself of all dissenting voices in a conscious--and quite successful--effort to create lockstep discipline and unquestioning obedience. Already looking ahead to 2009, which will witness concurrent presidential, municipal, and Legislative Assembly elections for the first time since 1994, the FMLN's (primarily former Communist Party) leadership is in no mood to accommodate President Saca's legislative agenda and thereby boost his continuing popularity with the electorate. END COMMENT.

Barclay